

Religious freedom panel prepares to close

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A federal watchdog panel that monitors religious freedom around the world is preparing to shut down next Friday (Dec. 16) unless Congress passes a last-minute measure to save it.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has narrowly dodged closure twice this fall. But with only days before the termination date, this is the closest the commission has come to actually shutting down.

"At this point, we have to cease all our normal operations and begin winding down," said USCIRF chairman Leonard Leo. "This is not something we do lightly."

Congress created the panel in 1998 to advise the president, Congress and the State Department on the plight of persecuted religious groups worldwide. It has nine commissioners, a staff of 17 and a \$4 million annual budget.

A stand-alone bill to reauthorize the commission for an additional two years passed the House nearly three months ago, but a "hold" has been placed on the bill in the Senate, reportedly by Majority Whip Richard Durbin, D-Ill.

According to a report last month in CQ Weekly, Durbin wants the federal government to buy an unused maximum-security prison in Illinois and turn it into a federal facility.

Durbin may be willing to lift his hold, according to the CQ story, in return for the prison purchase. Prison funding is partly controlled by a House subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Frank R. Wolf, R-Va., a champion of religious freedom who wrote the USCIRF reauthorization bill.

If the stand-alone bill fails, Congress could keep the panel alive by funding it as part of an "omnibus" bill or by passing another continuing resolution.

Some religious rights watchdogs are anxious over USCIRF's uncertain fate.

Former Ambassador Randolph Bell, president of the First Freedom Center, said, "Our fear is that it would send a signal, unintentional or otherwise, that we have demoted the issue, in our foreign affairs and in our own national life."

Others, however, have been critical of the role of USCIRF.

Joseph K. Grieboski, chairman of the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, said that instead of reauthorizing USCIRF, the Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department should be given a bigger budget and more staff.

"It should be the job of the State Department to engage in these issues," Grieboski said. "It shouldn't be some external institution that doesn't have either the constitutional or the legal basis to be engaging in U.S. foreign policy."